



# Church of Ireland Records

Dan Poffenberger, AG®

Senior British and Irish Research Specialist  
Family History Library  
poffenbergerds@familysearch.org

The purpose of this handout is to introduce you to Church of Ireland research. This includes a brief discussion of the history of the church in Ireland, the time-period, content and availability of records. It also includes some basic research strategy and, most importantly, a list of key resources for the reader to pursue in much greater depth than will be included here.

## Introduction

Christianity was introduced in Ireland in the 5th century. Soon after its introduction, St. Patrick is credited with the proselyting efforts that made Ireland a Christian country with what is known as the Celtic Church. Though the invasion of Henry II, King of England in 1151 brought the Celtic Church in line with the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformation initiated by Henry VIII in 1534 was the start of the Church of England. It was introduced into Ireland becoming the Church of Ireland. It was the established or state church in Ireland from the time of King Henry VIII 1870. The Celtic Church is considered the source of the modern church by the Church of Ireland.

Church of Ireland members were relatively few as a percentage of the population. In the 1861 Census, 12% of the population identified themselves as Anglican. The province of Ulster had the most by far, about 20%, followed by Leinster (12.4%), Munster (5.3%) and Connaught (4.4%). To be a member of parliament, vote, bear arms, and purchase land (for a time), one had to belong to the Church of Ireland. In effect, the ruling class in Ireland belonged to the church. Some Catholics belonged to the Church of Ireland in order to maintain control of their real and personal property.

As the state church, the Church of Ireland was responsible for many of the functions now the responsibility of the civil government, such as care of the poor. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a slow process took place separating all but the religious functions of Church of Ireland. The smallest, local jurisdiction administering these functions was the parish. During the process of separating church from the state, civil parishes were created usually mirroring Church of Ireland parish boundaries. These are the parishes named in government records such as tax, census, poor law (from 1838). These parishes are different from Roman Catholic parishes. Some boundaries and names are the same, but many names and boundaries are different. Regardless of your ancestor's religious affiliation, it is important for you to know the Church of Ireland/civil parish in the area your ancestor lived and the records referring to it. The purpose of this lesson is to acquaint you with the records of the Church of Ireland and how to access them.

## Church of Ireland Records and the Fire

In 1867, an act was passed by the Irish parliament to "provide for keeping safely the Public Records of Ireland." In 1875, this act was amended to include the records of the Church of Ireland. Parochial officers were required to make inventories of records in their custody. In 1876,

another act was passed detailing how the records needed to be kept in order to remain in local custody. By 1922 records of about 1,000 Church of Ireland parishes had been deposited at the Public Records Office (PRO). The Irish Republican Army opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty that divided Ireland into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In April 1922, they invaded the Four Courts government complex and used the PRO as their munitions store. A battle between the Irish Provisional Government and the IRA started on June 28<sup>th</sup> and on June 30<sup>th</sup>, the munitions store exploded destroying the PRO and the Church of Ireland registers deposited there. It is still disputed as to which side ignited the munitions. The following are the percentages of Church of Ireland records lost by province: Connaught 61%, Leinster 50%, Munster 61%, and Ulster 37%. Records of the Irish Roman Catholic church were not considered state records therefore they were not deposited and were not destroyed by the destruction of the PRO.

## Church of Ireland Records and Content

It is estimated that 637 registers for Church of Ireland parishes were not deposited but kept locally. The Representative Church Body Library (RCBL) is the primary records repository for Church of Ireland records. They have records relating to over 1,100 Church of Ireland parishes. Additionally, numerous local historians and genealogists had made transcripts of registers. These may document entire parishes or specific families within them. These transcripts may be found in archives and libraries across Ireland. The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland has microfilm copies of Church of Ireland parish registers for the counties of Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Londonderry, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan, and Tyrone.

An excellent book providing more information regarding Church of Ireland records was written by Dr. Raymond Refaüssé, Librarian and Archivist of the Church of Ireland. It is titled *Church of Ireland records* (2nd ed., Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2006) FHL# 941.5 D27mg v. 1.

The following indicates the basic types of records kept by Church of Ireland parishes and the information contained in them:

### Parish Registers

#### Baptisms

Child's name, father's name, mother's name (but not maiden), date of baptism, (from 1820s onwards) date of birth, and clergyman's name. They may also list the occupation of father, and "abode."

#### Marriages

Names of groom and bride including maiden name, marriage date, and from 1820s onwards - addresses of parties, names and addresses of witnesses. Post-1844 included the names and occupations of the fathers of the bride and groom.

**Burials:** Name of deceased, date of burial. In some cases, residence and age may be included.

### Other Church Records

**Vestry Minute Books:** Vestry minutes are notes taken from the meeting of the vestry to discuss church business. The business may relate to the church edifice and administration. They may also contain names of individuals and families.

**Other Parish records:** Other parish records may include account books, bastardy bonds, confirmations, and records related to the poor. Account books often contain lists of parishioners.

**Marriage License Bonds:** These are not parish records but diocesan records and an index to them is found at the [www.nationalarchives.ie](http://www.nationalarchives.ie) website. They do name some grooms, brides and the diocese in which they marry.

## Locating Church of Ireland records

The best strategy is to first determine what records exist. The best way to do this is a two-part approach. For the first part, use the website [www.johngrenham.com](http://www.johngrenham.com), look up a map of civil parishes for your county of interest. Starting at the home page:

- 1) Click "browse"
- 2) Click "Interactive Maps"
- 3) Click on your county of interest  
A clickable county map with the names of civil parishes should be listed on the left.
- 4) Click on the name of your civil parishes. This brings up great page detailing a variety of parish resources and information.
- 5) Click on term "church records" in the column on the right. The number of church records is noted just before the term "church records."
- 6) The existence of Church of Ireland records is noted with locations. It also includes a reference to what was known to be at the PRO before it exploded.

The advantage to this approach to start is the clickable map and the names of civil/Church of Ireland parishes for the county.

The second part is to access the List of Parish Registers at the RCB Library website. Use the website <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/about/rcb-library> then:

- 1) Click on "List of Parish Registers in the column on the left.
- 2) Click on the link titled "List of Parish Registers as a PDF by clicking here."

A new internet window should open up with a 98 page .pdf file listing every Church of Ireland parish, the registers available and what is known about them. It is important to read the first few pages in order to understand the register. A color-coding system indicates:

- Original records held by the RCB Library
- Microfilm copies held at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI)
- Records which were lost in the fire but for which subsequent supplemental materials have been found.
- Registers lost in the PRO Ireland
- Registers that are known to remain in local custody

This list is current to October 2020. It is alphabetical and can be searched using the "Ctrl+F" function. It also has links to other websites when the information can be found there.

The RCB Library is currently undergoing an extensive digitizing project. Information on the project can be found at <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/news/8258/ministerial-visit-to-rcb-library>). This project will make all of their register records up to the year 1900 freely available to the public in an online setting, fully indexed and searchable.

This is being done through the [www.irishgenealogy.com](http://www.irishgenealogy.com) website. Click on the "Church Records" tab at the top left of the page. Before searching, it is wise to click on the "Current list of available parishes" link to see what parishes are included. Counties with Church of Ireland indexes, transcriptions and images to original records are Carlow, Dublin, and Kerry.

There is also the Anglican Record Project, which can be accessed here:

<https://www.ireland.anglican.org/about/rcb-library/anglican-record-project>.